

Welfare Reform and the “Ghost of the Welfare Queen”

June 25, 2016



Like a spectral apparition from a Shakespeare play or an M. Night Shyamalan film, the dreaded ghost of welfare reform is making a ghoulish comeback on Capitol Hill just in time for its twentieth anniversary.

The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) of 1996 marked the unceremonious end of the welfare rights movement yet did nothing to end the misery and vilification of those people actually in need of welfare. For nearly fifty years, conservative politicians, pundits, and policy wonks developed a steady drumbeat of stump speeches and position papers rife with racially coded rhetoric and imagery intended to invoke the contentiousness surrounding welfare that dominated previous election cycles. Even now, at the start of 2016, congressional Republicans under the leadership of Rep. Tom Price of Georgia, chair of the House’s budget committee, have put federal funding for welfare programs such as Temporary Assistance for Needy Families in grave peril. Utilizing the process of budget reconciliation, the GOP’s machinations would allow them to bypass any opposition put forth by Democrats in Congress while effectively striking a deathblow to this and other public assistance programs. Although these draconian measures and the divisive politics that undergird them might seem archaic, the sheer antipathy towards any semblance of welfare as a bulwark against extreme poverty remains very alive for countless conservatives. This constellation of issues, images, and ideas coalescing into the most derogatory depiction of welfare continues to dominate the American psyche even now.

In 1976, former California Governor and Republican presidential candidate Ronald Reagan issued a wholesale condemnation of Black female welfare recipients as ruthless con artists robbing the federal government blind and undermining the moral fabric of U.S. society. The so-called “welfare queen,” as Reagan stated in his diatribe, “has eighty names, thirty addresses, twelve Social Security cards and is collecting veterans benefits on four non-existing deceased husbands. And she is collecting Social Security on her cards. She’s got Medicaid, getting food stamps, and she is collecting welfare under each of her names. Her tax-free cash income is over \$150,000.” Although the story itself rode the fine line between fable and farce, Reagan’s yarn about poor Black women as liars, cheats, and manipulators gained huge political traction. Both in popular memory and public policy, the long shadow of Reagan’s “welfare queen” imagery still looms quite large within the national psyche.

Twenty years after Reagan’s infamous “welfare queen” speech, President Bill Clinton—a centrist white Southern Democrat whose presidency was largely made possible by strong electoral support from African American voters—made good on his election pledge to “end welfare as we know it” with the passage of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) in

1996. Keeping this ominous promise meant, among other things, reducing the number of women who were eligible to access the welfare system, limiting the number of years one could receive benefits, and making work a compulsory requirement of the program. Without question, welfare reform became a top priority for President Bill Clinton's administration. In effect, the Clinton White House had hijacked a key part of the infamous GOP's Contract with America orchestrated by then-Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich and the congressional Republican majority in 1994.

For those who may have forgotten, it has been nearly two decades since welfare was regularly debated in public policy arenas and the mainstream media—and often used as a political wedge issue by Democrats and Republicans alike. Furthermore, with contemporary right-wing politicians, conservative pundits, and libertarian activists inspiring movements such as the Tea Party, who cloak their project of reasserting white national and global authority beneath a cover of states' rights and fiscal austerity, there is bound to be more sanctimonious posturing and rhetoric about the invalidity of public assistance as well as the necessity to compel Black women into employment, to control sexual behaviors, to determine reproductive options (or lack thereof), and to force familial structures into shapes deemed "responsible" and "acceptable" by mainstream society. Since the mid-1990s, legislators in the United States across the partisan and ideological spectrum pledged to significantly curb anti-poverty spending. This pronouncement was delivered to the delight of the wealthy as well as many middle-class, mainstream, suburbanite Americans and, conversely, to the detriment of poorest members of the nation's populace.

In a classic Clintonian maneuver of political triangulation, the PRWORA targeted Reagan's myth of the "welfare queens." By design, the bill was deliberately intended to curtail a presumed "cultural of poverty" among welfare recipients, exemplified by perceived illicit behavior, sexual promiscuity, laziness, personal irresponsibility, and out-of-wedlock births that had been key talking points of the conservative public policy agenda. Among other things, it gave the states almost absolute discretion over administration of benefits as well as creation of Temporary Assistance for Needy Families and jobs training programs to replace the Aid to Families with Dependent Children program. All of this was done with the intention of moving the poor "from welfare to work." The legislation also imposed a lifetime limit of five years on recipient benefits. Consequently, these actions led to en masse purging of otherwise needy and eligible recipients from the welfare rolls nationwide.

Die-hard liberals and progressives have disparaged and bemoaned the PRWORA ever since its passage. While Gwendolyn Mink argued that the PRWORA substantially transformed welfare as a function of U.S. citizenship, it can also be observed that it poisoned the well of any lingering sense of collective goodwill and enlightened self-interest pertaining to American society's attitudes toward welfare recipients, most notably poor single Black mothers and their families.

In hindsight, despite the Clinton administration's claims to the contrary, the 1996 welfare reform bill has been deemed responsible for causing a dramatic rise in endemic poverty, especially among minorities and single mothers. While employment did increase, most of the former recipients who found jobs did not escape poverty. In a *Ms.* magazine article, "A Step Back to the Workhouse?" (1987), cultural critic Barbara Ehrenreich presciently criticized the ideas behind the reform legislation for perpetuating negative stereotypes of poor Blacks; she asserted the concepts reinforced patriarchal views regarding children's legitimacy based on heteronormative notions of family.

In the rising tide of the centrist politics and neoliberal economic policy of President Bill Clinton's administration, a majority of both Republicans and Democrats alike distanced themselves from many progressive gains achieved during the 1960s. During the decades since President Lyndon Johnson's robust domestic social agenda known as the Great Society—viewed by many critics and supporters alike as the high tide of U.S. liberalism—a vast array of conservatives and libertarians have routinely

characterized any liberal policy initiatives within the body politic as “wasteful, ineffective, and damaging” and ultimately castigating the state as the “worst enemy” of the nation’s poor. Since the 1990s, U.S. policy experts and lawmakers have consistently blamed poor Black people for creating the nation’s massive deficit without mentioning astronomical defense spending and the soaring costs of corporate welfare during the Reagan-Bush era, effectively singling out the poor as America’s ubiquitous scapegoats. Those with this view have vowed to dismantle any social program that may directly or indirectly aid the poor, as demonstrated in the recent controversy related to President Obama’s signature legislative accomplishment, the Affordable Care Act (most commonly known as Obamacare).

Ironically, the crucial dividing line within the leadership of the economic justice movement (more so than among the rank and file) during the last half century has been the diametric feud between the “politics of respectability” advanced by the Black middle class and “dog-whistle politics” employed by white conservatives. Although typically not discussed in tandem with one another, the politics of respectability and dog-whistle politics have been meshed in a deeply complex fashion during the past fifty years. While working at cross purposes—the former viewed as a means of racial uplift and the latter as a system of racist subterfuge—these dual forces have converged in catastrophic fashion, with the fates of poor Black families headed by single mothers hanging in the balance.

The politics of respectability refers to efforts by marginalized or disenfranchised groups to police the bodies, behaviors, and beliefs of their own members in order to demonstrate that their social values are not only compatible with but absolutely consistent with mainstream values, rather than challenging the mainstream for its failure to accept diverse cultural perspectives and experiences. In her definition of the concept, Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham states,

While adherence to respectability enabled Black women to counter racist images and structures, their discursive contestation was not directed solely at white Americans; [elite Black women] condemned what they perceived to be negative practices and attitudes among their own people. Their assimilationist leanings led to their insistence upon Blacks’ conformity to the dominant society’s norms of manners and morals. Thus the discourse of respectability disclosed class and status differentiation.

Moreover, Higginbotham asserts, “the politics of respectability emphasized reform of individual behavior and attitudes both as a goal in itself and as a strategy for reform of the entire structural system of American race relations. ... Instead, the politics of respectability assumed a fluid and shifting position along a continuum of African American resistance.” In her analysis of the turn-of-the-century efforts of middle-class Black Baptist churchwomen who established their own voluntary associations in order to advance their own racial uplift agenda, Higginbotham indicates that much of the interracial schism rooted in social hierarchy and moral standards largely was glossed over in the historiography of the Black freedom struggle. In his recent essay in *Harper’s* magazine, legal scholar Randall Kennedy offered a fairly robust defense of respectability politics in the wake of dogged criticism by contemporary protesters such as those affiliated with the Black Lives Matter campaign as well as progressive Black scholar-activists. Kennedy argues, at least in part, that respectability politics is still viable in America as long as Black people retain “an underlying optimism” that the vestiges of hatred and inequality can eventually be brought to heel through a faithful commitment to the proper working of our civil society. However, as Frederick C. Harris notes,

What started as a philosophy promulgated by Black elites to “uplift the race” by correcting the “bad” traits of the Black poor has now evolved into one of the hallmarks of Black politics in the age of Obama, a governing philosophy that centers on managing the behavior of Black people left behind in a society touted as being full of opportunity. In an era marked by rising inequality and declining economic mobility for most Americans—but particularly for Black Americans—the twenty-first-

century version of the politics of respectability works to accommodate neoliberalism. The virtues of self-care and self-correction are framed as strategies to lift the Black poor out of their condition by preparing them for the market economy.

Conversely, dog-whistle politics functions as a system of political rhetoric that utilizes racially coded vocabulary and imagery that appear to mean one thing to the general population but have an alternate, more layered resonance for a conservative political constituency. Offering a more specific definition of dog-whistle politics, Ian Haney López suggests,

Over the last half-century conservatives have used racial pandering to win support from white voters for policies that principally favor the extremely wealthy and wreck the middle class. Running on racial appeals, the right has promised to protect supposedly embattled whites, when in reality it has largely harnessed government to the interests of the very affluent.

Part and parcel of dog-whistle politics since the electoral success of Richard Nixon's Southern Strategy in the early 1970s has been the systematic scapegoating of racial and ethnic minorities to appease the economic anxieties of white working- and middle-class voters. As a result, such racist appeals, both implicit and explicit, became a mainstay of conservative political rhetoric and consequently established the racial politics of the contemporary Republican Party. One of the most fruitful tactics for conservative politicians and pundits was to stigmatize Black people as con artists cheating the welfare system and robbing white taxpayers. In this fashion, dog-whistle politics foments a mythical binary that assumes that all whites are hardworking, taxpaying, and virtuous while all Blacks are lazy, indigent, and venal. "The middle class no longer saw itself in opposition to concentrated wealth, but now instead it saw itself beset by grasping minorities," Haney López contends. "Racial attacks on liberalism shifted the enemy of the middle class from big money to lazy minorities, and transmuted economic programs that helped to build the nation into welfare for undeserving groups."

The efforts toward so-called "welfare reform" might be more accurately labeled as a tug-of-war between the politics of respectability and dog-whistle politics. In her analysis of how mainstream media's negative cultural images of Black women shapes U.S. social policy, K. Sue Jewell argues that several myths dominate popular perceptions of single Black mothers who head poor families. Jewell argues,

Cultural images continue to influence the societal perception of African American women as matriarchs or sexually loose and irresponsible women who substitute welfare for work and marriage and cannot be taken seriously. These stereotypes continue to support reactionary and punitive social policies and practices that exclude African American women from societal resources and institutions.

Furthermore, Annelise Orleck contends, derogatory and stereotypical depictions of single Black mothers as welfare recipients pervaded scholarly literature and social policy during the height of LBJ's proclaimed "War on Poverty" in the 1960s.

A prime example of this pejorative treatment of Black motherhood can be found in the infamous 1965 governmental study entitled "The Negro Family: The Case for National Action," spearheaded by the late sociologist, U.S. Senator, and Assistant Secretary of Labor Daniel Patrick Moynihan (more commonly known as the Moynihan Report). This controversial intra-administration report largely blamed the pathological crises befalling African American families and the persistence of poverty amongst the nation's Black populace on African American mothers. Moynihan went to great lengths to condemn Black matriarchy for making Black women too assertive and autonomous while conversely impairing and emasculating Black men. In effect, the Moynihan Report was engaging in

the worst form of “blaming the victim” by castigating Black mothers—whether they were welfare recipients or not—for their central role in maintaining Black families even in the absence of spouses or domestic partners or of larger societal support systems. Even now, roughly fifty years after the Moynihan Report was published, its main arguments still continue to frame a wide array of national debates about welfare programs and family policies.

For today’s progressives and anti-poverty activists, I would contend that what is needed to combat the extreme circumstances of poverty is what I refer to as “train-whistle politics.” As the name suggests, train-whistle politics derives its meaning from the historic practice of railroad workers sounding an audible alarm to signal impending danger of oncoming trains potentially on a collision course as well as to provide a necessary means of communication. Whether used to provide fair warning to those nearby of a potential train wreck or to exchange vital information at varying distances for those who need to know what was going on in an era bereft of instantaneous messaging and social media, the train whistle was an indispensable feature of both the livelihoods and very lives of those most dependent on hearing the message loud and clear. Also, since train whistles were relatively simple devices and extremely inexpensive to use compared to other, more sophisticated alarm systems, the use of the train whistles’ resonant volume in distinctive yet recognizable patterns literally served as the preferred survival mechanism for railway operators and those dependent upon them. In like fashion, train-whistle politics need to be deployed by those seeking to undo decades of regressive social thinking and public policy regarding welfare reform and anti-poverty programs without the persistent observance of respectability politics. Meanwhile, train-whistle politics needs to stand in stark contrast to the dog-whistle politics that have been the mainstay of conservative politicians from the late 1960s to now (just witness the rise of Donald Trump for the most recent, raucous example of this phenomenon). Those of us on the left need to restore our commitment to loud and resounding resistance to oppressive social policies and those who enact them.

Although the Occupy movement demonstrated the most recent example of this practice, I would draw our attention to an earlier model, namely the National Welfare Rights Organization (NWRO). The NWRO emerged in 1966 within an atmosphere of social and political tumult occasioned by the existence of profound economic precariousness amid unprecedented wealth. The NWRO successfully obtained public assistance for the myriad of families in financial distress by capitalizing on that era’s Democratic liberalism and ethos of grassroots protest. Three developments in the 1960s directly contributed to the eruption of welfare rights activities: the civil rights movement, the Great Society’s “War on Poverty” initiatives, and a stark evolution of social-welfare thought by the American left. The NWRO emulated the waning civil rights movement’s nonviolent direct-action style of protest, drawing upon the leadership and support of veteran civil rights activists. Johnson’s War on Poverty, particularly the community action component, created a political climate conducive to reform-oriented social movements and provided the necessary stimulus and resources for anti-poverty activists to commit themselves to welfare reform. Finally, the nation’s renewed interest in eradicating poverty, inspired by harsh “poverty paradox” criticism by social reformers and liberal social critics such as Michael Harrington and Martin Luther King, Jr., who questioned the persistence of poverty in arguably the world’s wealthiest society, spurred many wealthy and middle-class Americans to contribute, either financially or otherwise, to anti-poverty organizations. Moreover, the shift in focus from rural white poverty to urban Black immiseration publicized the plight of welfare recipients. These factors combined to support and legitimate, at least briefly, the grievances of Black people and poor people in full recognition that these constituencies were never mutually exclusive.

As demonstrated by the National Welfare Rights Organization, the welfare rights movement was an excellent example of confronting racial injustice, gender inequality, and endemic poverty. When

reflecting upon the NWRO, Frances Fox Piven and Richard Cloward wrote, "It was not clear how activists could, as a practical day-to-day matter of organizing, mount an attack on poverty attacking its main cause—underemployment and unemployment." The one resource that poor people had in clear abundance was (and is) civil disobedience, defined as the ability to disrupt the established norms of dominant society by making trouble for the stakeholders of the status quo. By producing political shockwaves so significant that the authorities are forced to respond, the NWRO would be able to surmount its other, more glaring, organizational deficits. Moreover, having learned the lessons of the recent nonviolent civil rights movement, the NWRO's greatest hope for success would be if they could force the state to respond to their demands while also making it rather loathsome to use force against the protesters. Toward this end, advancing the image of Black single mothers as the heart and soul of the welfare rights movement depended upon the state being unwilling to wield force against them in any form. But, by and large, social disruption has proven to be a purely limited option most effective under extraordinary historical circumstances. Although the politics of protest are extremely short-lived and costly, it remains the most effective means to utilize the scarce resources at the disposal of the poor to improve the conditions of their lives and communities. As Deborah Gray White contends, "The rationale behind the National Welfare Rights Organization's call for action was its leaders' belief that the poor had a right to live decently and with dignity."

Ironically, the NWRO demanded a guaranteed annual income as a direct outgrowth of the women's desire for meaningful employment. As Deborah Gray White states, "The right to work at a good job was central to their program, but since they doubted the existence of such jobs for everyone, they demanded the government institute a guaranteed annual income" that was both need-based and adjusted for cost-of-living increases. This intimate connection between the federal government, NWRO, and labor unions lasted only a few years. For instance, in the early 1970s, the Chicago branch of the NWRO formed a short-lived partnership with the Illinois Union of Social Service Employees while the Hospital and Health Care Employees Union in Philadelphia lent its steadfast support to the Kensington Welfare Rights Union, one of the nation's most outspoken, long-lasting welfare rights organizations. By finding common ground in their respective attempts to eradicate widespread poverty amongst the poorest segment of the nation's populace, these and other affiliations between labor unions and welfare recipient movements emphasized the underdeveloped potential of anti-poverty struggles in the United States.

The NWRO eventually faced internal debates and organizational problems that it was never able to overcome. Buoyed by the conservative ascendancy in U.S. politics circa the 1970s, the Nixon administration aggressively pursued the dismantling of liberal anti-poverty programs. However, while they lasted, local welfare rights organizations were galvanized into a movement by experienced civil rights activists, government-funded volunteers, and welfare recipients working together to expand both the definition and function of the American welfare state. Much deeper critical consideration should be given to how the NWRO as well as the national welfare rights movement—in terms of their successes as well as their failures—can be seen as an important contribution to a more comprehensive understanding and critique of the American welfare state.

Toward this end, the NWRO created a "Welfare Bill of Rights" to inform recipients (and the general public) of poor peoples' right to live with dignity. Combating the lurid images of "welfare queens" shirking work was of paramount importance to the movement. NWRO activists reassured welfare mothers that miserable conditions were no fault of their own but rather capitalism and an inadequate welfare state were the real enemies. Women should not be forced to work in order to buttress the wealth of corporations at the expense of their families. NWRO activists contested prototypical "workfare" proposals, arguing that those arrangements only served to ensure a pool of marginal workers and, in that way, subsidized industry by forcing women to work for a non-living wage. The NWRO ardently resisted the elitist notion that poor people should be condemned to

“minimum wage slavery.” Insisting that welfare recipients should not be forced to relinquish their human rights, the group argued that whether or not a person received public assistance was irrelevant to their innate right to privacy and dignity. Furthermore, they demanded that welfare mothers be treated as “first-class citizens” with the same rights as others, including the right to choose between their roles as workers and mothers.

From its inception in 1966 to its demise in 1975, the NWRO publicized the availability of welfare, reduced the stigma attached to welfare dependency, and politicized the poverty-stricken members of our population. In its prime, the NWRO was representative of the train-whistle politics I am recommending, endeavoring to improve the quality of life for those suffering from chronic transgenerational poverty by proclaiming loudly and boldly that the poorest members of our body politic have fundamental rights as well as collective power that had to be respected. As rancorous debates about anti-poverty programs and the supposedly “undeserving poor” threaten to resurface in the nation’s capital, maybe train-whistle politics as a more thoughtful and truthful ideological framework might finally put the ghost of the “welfare queen” to rest at long last.

Footnotes